

Fifth Circuit District Drug Court completes statewide system

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The creation of a drug court for the Fifth Circuit Court District completes statewide coverage of drug courts in Mississippi. All 22 Circuit Court districts now operate drug courts.

Circuit Judges Joseph Loper of Ackerman and Clarence E. Morgan III of Kosciusko will use the drug treatment and intensive supervision program for qualifying persons facing charges in Attala, Carroll, Choctaw, Grenada, Montgomery, Webster and Winston counties.

Mississippi Supreme Court Chief Justice Bill Waller Jr., who has pushed for statewide coverage of drug courts, said, "I think it's a great day for the citizens of Mississippi that drug courts are now available in every judicial district of the state. The cost savings are significant, but the difference it makes in the lives of the participants and their families is the reason they are successful."

State Drug Court Coordinator Joey Craft said, "With this new program comes new opportunities for those living in the seven counties of the Fifth Circuit. Those who find themselves trapped in the revolving door of the criminal justice system and drug addiction will have a chance to break that cycle."

Fifth Circuit Drug Court Coordinator David Bain of Kosciusko said, "A lot of good people wind up in a situation where they are not strong enough. We are going to try to give them the tools they need."

Drug courts are special courts which address crimes committed by persons addicted to drugs or alcohol. Drug courts may accept persons charged with drug possession or non-violent property crimes.

Drug courts seek to rehabilitate drug-using offenders through drug treatment and intensive supervision with frequent court appearances and random drug testing. Drug courts offer the incentive of a chance to remain out of jail and be employed. Participants who fail to remain drug-free and in compliance with all program requirements face the sanction of a prison sentence.

After completing drug treatment, participants will meet with one of the judges every two weeks to report on their progress. Participants are subject to random drug testing. They must participate in a self-help program such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous twice a week. They must have a job or be in school. If they don't have a high school diploma, they must enroll in General Education Development (GED) classes.

Drug Court, with its intensive supervision, will deter relapses. "It's a way of holding people accountable," Judge Loper said. "If you don't have somebody following them, it's easy to slide or slip off the wagon."

Bain and Probation Officer Michael Ming of Louisville will make house calls as well as require participants to come to the Drug Court office in Kosciusko for testing.

Judge Morgan, who has been on the bench for 17 years, said, "I've been putting folks into rehab since I've been a judge. Drug Court is a more extensive program, a lengthier program, and I think we will have more success."

One of the difficulties facing the program is the size of the seven-county district. That was one of the issues which made the judges reluctant to start a program. "It's 90 miles from Grenada to Winston County, which provides some logistical problems, not for judges but for the people who have to come to court," Judge Morgan said.

The Drug Court may alternate sites for holding court.

Judge Loper said, "If we are determined to make it work, then it will work."

Judge Loper said, "I've heard of great success in other places and I'm hopeful we will have the same success with our Drug Court that I've seen others talk about throughout the state. I hope that it will not only rehabilitate and make better citizens of the people in the court, but that it will also save the taxpayers' money."

Commissioner of Corrections Chris Epps, a member of the Mississippi Drug Court Advisory Committee, said he welcomes the expansion to statewide coverage. Drug courts reduce the prison population. It's much cheaper to supervise people in drug courts.

Commissioner Epps said, "Generally a drug court can be operated with \$1,500 a year (per person), versus \$15,151.15 a year for housing an inmate."

Craft estimates that adult drug courts produce an annual savings of about \$38 million.

Commissioner Epps said, "Drug court is an excellent tool for users. It allows the person to be treated and at the same time to maintain family ties. On some occasions, it allows the participants to continue to support their families."

More than 3,350 people are enrolled in drug courts statewide, including adult and juvenile programs. Mississippi currently has 44 drug courts. In addition to 22 Circuit Court drug courts, the state has 15 juvenile programs, five misdemeanor level programs and two family treatment courts.

Three people have been accepted into the Fifth Circuit District Drug Court program since it began in early January. Judge Morgan said he expects that the program can accommodate up to 30 people in its first year.

The Fifth Circuit program is funded by \$118,000 from the state Administrative Office of Courts. Attala County will handle Drug Court finances and be reimbursed by AOC.

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